
Spring Home Improvement

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Illinois Correctional Industries: More Than An Annual Playhouse

By Mike Plunkett, Editor of the Journal-News

Sure, most folks around here are familiar with Illinois Correctional Industries (ICI).

Every year in late summer, an incredibly-crafted, beautiful wood playhouse, made by inmates at Graham Correctional Center in Hillsboro, shows up somewhere in a conspicuous location to be raffled off during the Old Settlers celebration, in support of events hosted by prison employees.

Remember the pirate ship last year? Well, it's just the tip of the iceberg.

Illinois Correctional Industries at Graham employs 30-some inmates who work regular hours, five days a week, making handcrafted all wood desks, shelves, tables, bookcases, cabinets, dressers, upholstered chairs and couches, and an entire catalog full of wood items.

"Industries is the most sought after job out here," according to Caroline Petefish, correctional industries supervisor at Graham, Lincoln, and Shawnee. "And these guys are amazing. They can make anything out of wood."

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"It takes patience," Darrell Hunt said of the hand-carving work he does to make wood state seals for Illinois Correctional Industries. *Journal-News/Mike Plunkett*

Because it's the best job, industries gets the "cream of the crop" at Graham. Every industries employee must have a high school diploma or GED. A good prison record is required. They must successfully interview for the job. And they get paid.

"They start at 35 cents an hour at Graham," Petefish said, "with an opportunity to make up to \$1.50 an hour."

It's the top paying job in the facility.

If you're wondering where you can go to buy top-flight solid-wood furniture made in Illinois prisons, you can't. It's illegal. Prison labor is as old as the first prison. When Illinois opened its first state-run prison in Joliet in 1858, the warden would contract out prison labor to local factories. Manufacturers soon located all around Joliet to take advantage of the cheap labor source, and the income from the contracts made the prison self-sufficient within six years.

But there was a down side. Low labor cost gave employers who used prisoners a tremendous advantage over competition, so contracting out inmates was outlawed in 1904. Wardens then began establishing in-house operations, and in 1931 Illinois law was enacted to prevent prison industries from providing labor or products to the open market. The act was followed by a "state-use" law, which encouraged state agencies and nonprofit organizations to purchase products from prison industries.

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Robert Hartman, left, works under Steven Meador, right, putting together specially-sized dressers for a facility in Rushville. Journal-News/Mike Plunkett



Deputy Director Glenn Austin, left, picks out a desk from an Illinois Correctional Industries catalog with Warden Cecil Polley, center, and Industries Supervisor Caroline Petefish. Journal-News/Mike Plunkett

Then in 1976, the prison industry program was centralized and officially became "Illinois Correctional Industries." Because of the "state-use" law, Graham's correctional industries' customers are other state agencies, colleges who purchase dorm furniture from them, not-for-profits, and other units of government.

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The sturdy wood benches and chairs in the hall outside the courtrooms on the second floor of the Montgomery County Courthouse in Hillsboro? Made by correctional industries 20-some years ago. The 20 county board member desks purchased two years ago in the Historic Courthouse? Also from correctional industries at Graham.

Currently, Graham Industries is refinishing dozens of pieces of heavy outdoor wooden furniture for Veterans Affairs. They're making specially-sized dressers for a facility in Rushville and building upholstered chairs for the Illinois Department of Human Services.

Step into the spacious rooms of the industries building at Graham and you'll see a beehive of activity along with some pretty sophisticated equipment, like the Auto-CAD CNC (Computer Numeric Controls).

There's also sanding rooms and spraying rooms. Your tax dollars at work? Nope. "Illinois Correctional Industries is a self-sustaining program," according to Illinois Department of Corrections Director of Communications Tom Shaer. "Revenue generated from the sale of its products fully funds its entire operation."

That includes not only the cost of equipment, but also instructors, superintendents, supervisors, account technicians and others. Of course, there are also hundreds of hand tools, and each one—from power equipment to the pair of scissors used on the upholstery cutting table—is logged out by the user and must be returned and accounted for by the end of the day.

There are also store rooms full of material—raw oak, walnut and birch, and bolts of fabric upholstery. Employees in correctional industries can work their way up to jobs that require more and more skill and training. As they advance, they are frequently trained by seasoned veterans at their craft.

John Curtis, the newest industries employee at Graham, was operating a sander. A few feet away, two others were doing the same job, working on the dressers that were headed for Rushville. Petefish introduced Steven Meador as "our top builder. You can give this man a picture of anything and he can build it."

On this particular day, he was helping a younger industries employee put together the dressers for the big Rushville order. Meador said his dad was a general contractor.

"I built homes," he said. "Supervisors here taught me to build furniture."

Some are more self-taught. The employee running the Auto CAD CNC, one of the most technical pieces of equipment in the shop, said he studied the system himself and read the CNC manual cover-to-cover. And one Industries employee at Graham does work that quite simply can't be taught. His creations are some of the most sought-after in the facility, including by the governor himself.

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He's Darrell Hunt, and he engraves the Illinois state seal into wooden works of art. First, he traces the image onto a prepared piece of wood. Next, a Dremel machine is used by Hunt to remove the excess around the image, then he carves eagle, shield, rock, sunset and all the details by hand. Each piece takes about two weeks. The artistic talent is something he grew up with.

"I used to draw," he said. "To draw, you have to zone out."

Hunt said he could teach his craft to another if he had the right student.

"It takes patience," he said. "Once you start rushing it, you make mistake after mistake."

Although those who work in industries appear to enjoy their job, the long term goal is still the primary prize.

"Besides teaching them a trade, it teaches work ethic," Petefish said. "They have to come to work every day, five days a week. They have to get along with each other; they have to learn to take direction. Hopefully, that's something they can take with them when they leave."